

# **Team GB, or No Team GB, That Is The Question: Football and the Post-War Crisis of Britishness**

**Neil Ewen**

*This article explores the furore surrounding the proposed creation of a 'Team GB' football team for the London 2012 Olympics, contextualizing it historically within the post-war crisis of Britishness.*

## **Introduction**

On 6 July 2005 it was revealed that London had been selected to host the 2012 Olympic Games. When the President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Jacques Rogge, made the announcement via satellite from Singapore, Trafalgar Square was the site of mass euphoria, with a crowd of approximately 30,000 cheering and waving Union flags. The head of Britain's bid committee, Lord Coe, told reporters, 'This is the most fantastic opportunity to do all we ever dreamed of in British sport', while the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, commented only slightly more soberly: 'This is a momentous day for Britain'. The Queen sent a public message of congratulations; the Conservative leader, Michael Howard, let it be known that he was 'delighted'; and the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Charles Kennedy, reckoned that the announcement would 'unite the nation' [sic].<sup>1</sup>

Yet, the consensus of that heady day soon showed signs of fracture. Even after Britain had enjoyed its most successful Olympics in its history at Beijing 2008 – winning 19 golds and 47 medals in all – many commentators continued to question the value of hosting London

2012. The chief concern was the probability of a serious financial shortfall: a fear exacerbated in late 2008 by reports of rising costs, and the outbreak of the global financial crisis.<sup>ii</sup> Indeed, the hugely expensive, lavish spectacle of Beijing served only to fuel growing anxieties that, in comparison, London 2012 was already doomed to failure, and may even become something of an embarrassment. This sentiment was at the heart of a statement from a group of MPs, which called for a strategic overhaul in November 2008. It suggested that the organisers retreat from even attempting to match the triumphalism of Beijing, and should instead host a stripped down ‘austerity games’, reminiscent of the 1948 London Games, which were so ascetic, in light of post-war conditions, that there were ‘no new stadiums, no athletes’ village and barely enough food for competitors’.<sup>iii</sup> And while other politicians and officials lined up to share their enthusiasm for 2012 – London’s Mayor, Boris Johnson, said that while China had ‘set the bar high’, ‘British ingenuity, wit and resourcefulness [would mean] a Games that is going to be in our own sweet way just as fantastic [as Beijing]’ – public opinion was ambivalent to say the least. Numerous press articles appeared suggesting widespread pessimism regarding the extent to which 2012 would benefit the country outside of London, while in June 2008 a poll of two thousand people suggested that only six out of ten Londoners thought that the Olympics would ‘bring any real benefit to their area’.<sup>iv</sup> Another poll in August 2008 suggested that only 15 per cent of the public at large thought that hosting the Games would be ‘good for the country’s international reputation’.<sup>v</sup>

We might consider this pessimistic discourse as a manifestation of latent anxieties about the financial crisis, the emergence of Asian superpowers threatening the dominant economies of ‘the West’, and Britain’s decline as a ‘world power’. But by June 2011, concerns about the popularity of the event were largely assuaged: after the first two rounds of ballots, 22 million orders had been placed for only six million available tickets, at which

point much of the media's coverage turned to other issues, such as the fairness of the ballot system, and the number of tickets reserved for corporations and other dignitaries.<sup>vi</sup>

However, another debate, conspicuous throughout the preparations for the event, is one that reveals more tangible problems concerning the condition of Britain and Britishness in the contemporary era. It involves the proposal to field a football team representing Great Britain at London 2012. The reason for the controversy, of course, lies in history, and the fact that the constituent nations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have long traditions of being represented by separate football teams that have been considered vehicles of national difference. While teams of amateur players representing Britain competed at Olympiads throughout much of the twentieth century, the relationship between football and Britishness has become increasingly complicated in the post-war era in light of the rise of nationalist politics and the entrenchment of English, Scottish, and Welsh national identities in the wider cultural realm, a trend reflected in the discourse of the sport.<sup>vii</sup> This article, then, maps out and interrogates this debate, situating it within the context of the wider discourse of Britishness as an identity since World War II. It reads the ambivalence about Team GB as an extension and dramatisation of wider anxieties about the condition of Britain and Britishness in the contemporary era.

### **The 'Team GB' Debate**

For some reason, 'soccer' has become terribly important to the Olympian blazers. If I didn't know better, I might even think someone was trying to put politics into sport.  
Ian Bell<sup>viii</sup>

As early as 2003 – the year during which London's bid for the Games was submitted to the IOC – the Football Association (FA) made clear its intention to 'play a positive role' in discussions about a Great Britain team competing in 2012. David Davies, FA spokesperson and 'football's representative in the British Olympic Association' (BOA), said that the issue

was ‘bound to be raised’ at a forthcoming meeting of the bid committee, a comment which suggests it had been an integral part of the thinking behind the bid from its inception as an idea. The huge financial success of the English Premier League (EPL) since it began in 1992 – if not the more modest achievements of the Scottish Premier League (SPL), established in 1998 – suggested that a ‘Team GB’ would generate considerable spectator interest, and, potentially, represent a huge moneymaking opportunity. Even at that time, however, Davies acknowledged that ‘bringing [it] about won’t be easy, but I suspect there may be a will to resolve it’. ‘I think everybody understands why we [sic] have not been participating at the Olympics in the past thirty or forty years’, he continued, ‘but there’s no question that this matter needs to be debated again’.<sup>ix</sup>

With this press conference, Davies set the parameters of a debate that continues today. His oblique reference to the fact that ‘everybody understands’ why there had not existed a British football team since 1972 acknowledged the deep divisions that existed within the football cultures of the British Isles: divisions illustrated most dramatically, perhaps, with the abandonment in 1984 of the Home International Championship (a competition between the four home nations, first played in 1884) on the grounds that the violence among spectators which often accompanied it rendered the competition more trouble than it was worth. For many, a football team representing Great Britain is anathema: a prospect that goes against the grain of football history. Even before the codification of the sport in the mid-nineteenth century early versions of football had served as site of contest between the different nations of (what is now known as) the United Kingdom.<sup>x</sup> And when codification came, it was along national lines that associations and leagues were constructed. Football, especially in Scotland, became a means through which distinctive national identities could be expressed within the state of the UK; moreover, rivalry with England gave the other home nations an opponent against whom they could define themselves in terms of character and playing style (until the

1950s the home nations rarely competed against other countries). These were the reasons the Football Association of Wales (FAW) and the SFA from the outset of this debate refused to countenance sanctioning players under their auspices to take part in a British team, arguing that to do so would throw into jeopardy their very existence.

From 2003 onwards, whenever a member of the government or the BOA spoke to the subject in the media, the response from the SFA and FAW was quick and to the point: thanks, but no thanks. (It was reported that the Irish Football Association (IFA) were ‘happy to discuss the concept’ of Team GB with the FA until 2007, by which time it had ‘gone cool on the idea’).<sup>xi</sup> In response to Davies’ press conference, the SFA head of communications, Andy Mitchell, told the BBC: ‘The general principle is that we would not do anything that would undermine the position of Scotland as an independent football nation. There has been no enthusiasm for a Great Britain team in Scotland as a whole’, a stance to which the SFA have stuck consistently ever since.<sup>xii</sup>

In December 2004, after Coe had claimed that the home associations had been ‘in detailed discussions’ about Team GB, the SFA issued a statement saying, ‘No meaningful discussions have taken place and none are planned’.<sup>xiii</sup> Furthermore, the new SFA chief executive Gordon Smith used his first press conference in 2007 to reaffirm his organisation’s opposition to the Team GB proposals.<sup>xiv</sup> Continuing the theme, former Fifa vice President, David Will – whose opinion ‘carries enormous weight...because of his years of experience within football’s governing body’ – warned in October 2007 ‘that [Scotland] should not take the chance of joining a British team’; and in August 2008, David Taylor, the Uefa chief executive (and former head of the SFA) warned that if Scottish players took part in Team GB, the Scottish national team may ‘disappear off the international map’.<sup>xv</sup> George Peat, the SFA President, spoke to his own depth of feeling on the subject by saying: ‘I can tell you there is no intention whatsoever of us becoming part of Team GB. We made up our mind

from day one that we didn't want any part of it and we will resist for as long as I'm here'; while the recently-appointed Secretary of State for Scotland, Jim Murphy, was verbally savaged on BBC Radio Scotland's *Sportsound* in November 2008 by the journalists Jim Traynor and Chick Young, who accused him, amongst other things, of being out of touch with the very people he was supposed to represent.<sup>xvi</sup> And Peter Reese, President of the FAW, said, pointedly, in August 2008: 'It will be a cold day in hell before any Wales player plays for Team GB at the Olympics'.<sup>xvii</sup>

An online poll in November 2007 on *The Scotsman*'s website appeared to suggest that these football bureaucrats and journalists were in tune with the Scottish public, seemingly confirming that there was little support for Team GB outside the confines of Westminster. After a couple of days of being posted, the results showed that there were 407 votes, with 92 per cent of respondents voting NO and 8 percent voting YES to the question of whether Scots should participate in a British team for 2012. Meanwhile, another online development of interest in this matter is [www.noteamgb.com](http://www.noteamgb.com), the homepage of a group, comprising fans of each of the home nations, which lobbies to prevent the creation of a British team. On the website, they echo David Will's concerns about setting a precedent that may be used in the future to dissolve the associations of the home nations, and sell 'No Team GB' T-shirts.

Amid apparent widespread unpopularity for Team GB in Scotland and Wales, and a more general sense of apathy for the subject in England, proponents of Team GB have utilised myriad tactics in an attempt to further their argument.

First, *the proponents attempted a softly-softly approach*. In Davies' 2003 interview cited above, it was already acknowledged that the SFA and FAW feared for their futures if Team GB came to pass. So the BOA and the government began slowly, raising the issue in interviews and press conferences. In January 2004, the then Minister for Sport, Richard Caborn, said that he realised there were anxieties in Scotland and Wales, but that he was

‘cautiously optimistic’ about Team GB going ahead. (He also said that all the home nations were ‘considering the plan’ and that their associations were ‘looking at it very seriously’ – something, as we have seen above, which was strenuously denied).<sup>xviii</sup> When it became clear that the opposition to Team GB was vociferous, the proponents changed tact.

Secondly, *they approached the subject by utilising guilt*. This method first occurred in October 2007 when the BOA chief Simon Clegg commented that it would be ‘unfair’ on Scottish and Welsh athletes if the SFA and FAW prevented them from taking part. This was echoed by sports ministers, Andy Burnham, in May 2009, and Hugh Robertson, who pleaded with fans and associations in June 2011 to ‘put politics aside and concentrate on the athletes’, continuing: ‘For any young man or woman, whether they are English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish, what this is about is the ability to represent their country in a home Olympics’.<sup>xix</sup> While the Northern Ireland manager, Nigel Worthington, stated his desire to see his players take part in Team GB, the only high-profile player to express interest was Gareth Bale of Wales (a position that put him into direct conflict with the FAW); other notable figures, such as Craig Brown, Neville Southall, and Julie Fleeting, came out against Team GB.<sup>xx</sup> The implication of Robertson that nationalist politics exists on one side of the debate and not the other reminds us of Michael Billig’s assertion that nationalism is associated rhetorically with radicalism and separatism, located on the periphery of ‘established democracies, usually shunned by the sensible politicians of the centre’.<sup>xxi</sup> Thus, in this case, support for Team GB is characterised as ‘natural’, while support for opposing groups is characterised as ‘political’.

Third, *the proponents lobbied Fifa on the issue*. Since 2003, football’s governing body has stated periodically that it could ‘guarantee’ the future existence of the home nations in the event that Team GB did materialise. On the *Sportsound* radio programme cited above, Jim Murphy revealed that he had been given ‘personal assurances’ on the matter from the

Fifa President Sepp Blatter. It was then pointed out to him that: one, personal assurances weren't worth the paper they were written on; and, two, Fifa may change its mind over the course of time, taking the involvement of the home nations in Team GB as a precedent for change. Indeed, a statement by Blatter in March 2008, suggested that opponents to Team GB had good cause to be wary:

They should choose a solution which will not harm the special privileges they hold and should enter only a team composed of players from England. This will then not provoke a long and endless discussion on the four British associations.<sup>xxii</sup>

In 2009, the associations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland signed an agreement that stated that they would not prevent England representing Great Britain on a one-off basis at London 2012, as long as there was no attempt to pick players under their registration for Team GB.<sup>xxiii</sup> For a time this seemed to settle the debate until the BOA began another round of argument in June 2011 when it announced that a multi-national Team GB was to be announced imminently.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Fourth, *the proponents attempted the infiltration of the hearts and minds of the Scots*, by talking up the possibility of Sir Alex Ferguson becoming the manager of Team GB. This was first mentioned in July 2008, when it was leaked anonymously to the press that 'tournament directors are understood to be keen to work with the Scot'. At first glance this would seem to be a suggestion that may have proved profitable, in that Ferguson has won more trophies than any other manager currently working in Britain, and that his Scottishness might help soothe the attitudes of Team GB opponents. Ferguson's reaction to this advocacy, however, was to say that 'I hope I am still on this planet in 2012 first of all. I'll be 70 years of age then, so I don't need any commitment to anything like that', and that 'Scotland, Northern



Ireland, Wales, even England, they all have their own identities, so I don't think [Team GB] is a starter.<sup>xxv</sup> This comment clearly evaded both Gerry Sutcliffe and Richard Caborn, who stated in August and November 2008 respectively that Ferguson should be the manager of Team GB'.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Fifth, *the proponents were arrogant*, as exemplified in November 2008 by Lord Colin Moynihan, the head of the BOA, when he said: 'We must have a team at the 2012 Games, and we will have a team' (to which the FAI responded, 'Lord Moynihan can huff and puff as much as he likes').<sup>xxvii</sup>

Sixth, *the proponents launched a PR offensive backed by high-profile sporting heroes*, including David Beckham (who stated his desire to be team captain and one of the three 'overage' players), and Sir Bobby Charlton (who was revealed to be playing a key role behind the scenes in bringing Team GB to fruition).<sup>xxviii</sup>

Lastly, *the proponents attempted a pragmatic approach*. In August 2008, the Labour MSP Cathy Jamieson suggested that Team GB be made up of the single home nation that won a new version of the dormant Home International Championship.<sup>xxix</sup> Three months later, the Conservative leader, David Cameron, proposed the same idea, presenting it as his own. Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond called this proposal 'daft'.<sup>xxx</sup>

The reasons for Salmond's opposition to any idea that facilitated the creation of a Team GB, including the Jamieson / Cameron option, are clear: he understands Team GB is not just a vehicle for representing Great Britain at the Olympics, but one that is loaded with political implications, specifically about promoting Britishness as an ideal. This is also the reason that Gordon Brown – one of Team GB's most vocal proponents – was also very much against the Jamieson / Cameron option. Not only would a Home International knock-out tournament raise the possibility of underlining tensions between the home nations and possibly lead to disinterest in Team GB amongst the supporters of those countries

unsuccessful in the qualifying tournament, it would also negate Brown's hope that a Team GB would symbolise the progressive version of Britishness that he had long been proselytising. For those like Brown and Coe, simply having a football team named Team GB in 2012 was not the point. Rather, it was that the team had to embody the idea of Britain and Britishness as a country and an identity that was diverse and multi-national: a symbol of health and vitality. As early as 2005, Coe was making this point:

I want to see a Great Britain football team that has membership from all the four home countries. That is important for me because we went to Singapore (for the 2012 Olympic bid in July) talking about inspiring young people and I didn't just talk about inspiring young people in two countries [England and Northern Ireland], but in four.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Coe's inspirational ideals for Team GB foreshadowed Brown's public declarations for football as a central symbol in the creation of a multi-national British identity. In January 2007, he raised the issue of a British Olympic football team in a number of speeches to mark the tricentenary of the 1707 Act of Union (given the context, a clear political gesture). Acknowledging opinion polls that suggested that the SNP were poised to gain a majority of seats at the forthcoming Scottish parliamentary elections (in May 2007), he said:

It is now time for supporters of the Union to speak up. It is time to acknowledge Great Britain for the success it has been and is: a model for the world of how nations can not only live side by side but are stronger together and weaker apart. Perhaps in the past we could get by with a Britishness that was assumed without being explicitly stated. But when our country is being challenged in Scotland, Wales and now England

by secessionists, it is right to be explicit about what we, the British people, share in common and the patriotic vision for our country's future... Obviously we have Scottish national teams for the European and World Cups, but right from the start of the Olympics it's been a UK team. I would expect there to be a UK football team.<sup>xxxii</sup>

As such, Brown chose to ignore the importance that the national football teams of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland play in the collective psyches of their respective nations as a vehicle of national difference, a view outlined by the journalist Martin Samuel who, when the Northern Irish manager Martin O'Neill was being considered for the England job, wrote:

There is a distinction between England and Britain in football terms. Britain, as a football entity, does not exist. It has no league, no international status. There is no Football Association of Great Britain and each time the concept of a united team is mentioned, the heads of the home nations get the vapours.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

### **Politics, Football, and 'the Scottish Problem'**

Gordon Brown is facing a vociferous English backlash in his bid to become Prime Minister, according to a poll published today. The ICM survey reveals a majority of English voters believe the Labour Party would be less appealing with a Scottish leader. The Chancellor has worked hard over the past year to project himself as a British, not a Scottish, politician, stressing his commitment to the Union and his pride in being British. But he is seen by the public as a Scottish MP who wants to become Prime Minister and, after the devolution settlement and the problems that has caused in England, this has led to resentment. Hamish MacDonnell<sup>xxxiv</sup>

It is unlikely that Gordon Brown – being a football fan himself – misunderstands the passions that national teams engender.<sup>xxxv</sup> It is more likely that while acknowledging these

passions, he mistrusts them. On the one hand he appreciates that they create (national) unity, but that, on the other hand, they create by their very nature divisions between the home nations that has the potential of undermining a collective sense of Britishness. Brown has always despised what he sees as petty-minded nationalism; we may note, however, pace Billig, that he never describes himself as a British nationalist. (We may note, too, that opposition to Team GB does not necessarily mean opposition to Britain or Britishness). There is plentiful evidence that football breeds its own variety of ill feeling between the nations of the UK. The example provided by media coverage of conflict during the 2006 World Cup, outlined below, proves that despite football's move toward respectability and financial viability in the early 1990s, the passions engendered by football continued to ignite petty nationalist sentiment. Brown's promotion of Team GB can be seen, then, as an attempt to harness the passion inherent in football, prise it from its nationalist-separatist context, and use it to forward a progressive solution to the ambivalences of contemporary Britishness.

In May 2006, Jack McConnell, then Scotland's First Minister, was interviewed on Glasgow's Radio Clyde. After a discussion about one hot topic of the day – pension reform – the programme ended with a question about another. In light of Scotland's failure to qualify for the forthcoming finals of World Cup in Germany, McConnell was asked to which country he would be lending his support. This was a loaded question. Earlier in the week two prominent MPs at Westminster – the Liberal Democrat leader, Sir Menzies Campbell, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown – had come out in support of England: announcements that engendered much media attention both north and south of the border. Although McConnell had anticipated the question and had prepared an answer, he sounded uncomfortable as he declared for Trinidad and Tobago. His decision to support the Caribbean team, he went on to explain, was based on the fact that there were a number of Trinidad and Tobago international players currently employed by league clubs in Scotland, while he added

that he always liked to ‘back the underdog’. Addressing the implication of the question (as to his views on England), he insisted that his decision was in no way related to Trinidad and Tobago being in the same group as Sven-Göran Eriksson’s team, whom he wished the very best of luck. In conclusion, he stated that this decision should in no way be controversial, adding: ‘I don’t link my football with my politics’.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

That final sentence revealed that he acknowledged football’s potential political power, a potential that was exploited on numerous occasions during the Germany World Cup by the Fifa organising committee: before each quarter final, for example, the captains of the competing teams took turns to read out anti-racism messages over public address systems; each team then stood united behind banners bearing anti-racism messages and slogans. These ceremonies were not only witnessed by the massive crowds inside the various stadia, but were also highlighted by television stations and beamed across the globe. With an estimated global audience reaching into the billions, football’s political potential was abundantly clear.

As a number of intellectuals noted, these anti-racism messages, as well as media coverage of the multi-ethnic nature of many of the participating teams and crowded ‘fan parks’ (spaces in which supporters without tickets to matches gathered to watch live coverage of games on giant screens), foregrounded football’s ‘positive’ political potential.<sup>xxxvii</sup> In Britain, however, behind the flag-waving and tub-thumping of much of England’s media (during the short period the England national team remained in the competition), the debate about football focused strongly on its potential to divide.

McConnell’s comments about supporting Trinidad and Tobago induced ‘uproar in many quarters’ with a number of prominent figures in the English media suggesting that, as Brits, Scots should ditch their prejudices and back England.<sup>xxxviii</sup> In the same week, however, an opinion poll taken in Scotland suggested that more than two thirds of Scots would not be supporting England at the World Cup.<sup>xxxix</sup> In an interview on BBC Radio Five Live Prime

Minister Tony Blair, in reference to the poll, said that he ‘could not understand the antipathy of Scottish and Welsh fans towards the England team’.<sup>xi</sup> And, within a few days, the *Daily Record* published a lengthy article about a Catholic scholar who claimed that it was sinful for Scots not to support England ‘for negative reasons’.<sup>xii</sup> The Scottish tennis player, Andy Murray, then ‘incurred the wrath of England football supporters’ in saying that he would like to see ‘anyone but England’ win the World Cup; the extent of the reaction to these comments led Murray to retract them the next day.<sup>xiii</sup> All this apprehension regarding relations between rival fans was given solid foundation with the news that two England supporters had been physically assaulted in separate Scottish cities, apparently for doing nothing more than wearing England jerseys.<sup>xliii</sup> In light of these attacks, Blair, McConnell, and a number of other prominent politicians, offered public condemnation.<sup>xliv</sup> The BBC’s *Newsnight* show then conducted a ‘light hearted experiment’ that quickly turned sour. The programme sent a reporter wearing an England shirt into Edinburgh and Glasgow, driving a car clad in St George’s flags.<sup>xlv</sup> Within moments of the reporter parking his vehicle, ‘a gang of youths had ripped off the flags, thrown bricks through the windows and jumped on the bonnet to kick through the windscreen. The vandalism was filmed by a covert camera’. The *Newsnight* website’s forum was inundated with criticism of the stunt by both Scots and English viewers, and fifteen MPs gave cross-party support to a motion at Westminster that ‘deplored’ the report and stated that ‘this was clearly a set-up by the BBC to encourage antisocial behaviour in its endeavour to besmirch the reputation of Scottish sports fans’. Strathclyde police later reported that they had received a complaint from a member of the public and would investigate the BBC for ‘inciting racial hatred’.

Amid all this, Scotland’s then national team manager, Walter Smith, sounded a note of calm in an attempt to play down the heightened tension and tackled the England question directly, commenting:

If you support Partick Thistle, you're not all of a sudden going to support Rangers, are you? So what's the problem? I don't know what the problem is, if it is a problem – it's maybe more of a contrived problem. Whatever team you support is a personal decision. Nobody can criticise anybody for that. I don't think anyone who is Scottish can turn around and say that they are supporters of England. Most people in Scotland support Scotland so I don't see the problem in saying you don't fancy England to win the World Cup. I'll support Italy.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Smith's choice to support Italy (who went on to win the competition) illustrated the shrewdness and nous that served him well during his period in charge: a period that signified the reconstruction of the Scotland team as a source of national pride (after an awful period under Berti Vogts which saw the team slide, seemingly inexorably, down Fifa's ranking table). But while Smith's attempts to play down the football rivalries between Scotland and England were admirable, his suggestion that this issue was merely 'a contrived problem' ignored the reality that football was a conduit of deeper extant issues. And, of course, Smith's comments were also political, in that he was playing to the same crowd as McConnell: that is to say the overwhelming majority of Scotland fans whose sympathies did not lie with England. Coming out in support of the 'Auld Enemy' would have undoubtedly put both men under severe personal pressure. Ming Campbell and Gordon Brown, by contrast, were clearly playing to an English audience. But their messages in support of England were widely understood as being attempts to capitalise for personal gain on the surge of interest in the England national team in the build up to the World Cup.

It was the extravagance of Gordon Brown's championing of England, however, that attracted the most severe criticism from Scots and English alike: his insistence that he

considered Paul ‘Gazza’ Gascoigne’s famous goal for England against Scotland in the 1996 European Championship group stages as his ‘favourite sporting moment’ was widely ridiculed in the media. (Brown later claimed his words were twisted. True or not, the media’s desire to amplify the point is certainly interesting in light of the issues discussed in this article.)<sup>xlvi</sup> For example, Mark Lawson wrote in *The Guardian* that:

...the Chancellor of the Exchequer, previously as legendarily Caledonian as porridge oats, seems keen to tell anyone who will listen that an England victory in the World Cup is currently his second-greatest ambition ... Brown’s psychology combines the reasoning of his rivals. Like Blair he understands the extent to which this government is Scottish – but he also sees it as a potential obstacle to his prospects of presiding over the whole kingdom. His sudden cheering for a football team his native culture requires him to despise is a way of positioning himself as a leader acceptable to the English.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Meanwhile, Andrew Rawnsley wrote in *The Observer* that Brown’s coming out as an England fan

is evidently designed to address the ‘Scottish problem’. It is hard to be sure to what extent his profound Scottishness really is a problem with English voters. What is obvious is that the Chancellor thinks it could be a very big handicap indeed. That is the only plausible explanation for his more excruciating attempts to ingratiate himself with the English. The most hilarious of these was his recent claim to have enjoyed Gazza’s goal against Scotland in Euro ’96. That assertion was as risible as his



suggestion that the first thing he does when he jumps out of bed of a morning is to switch on his iPod for a blast of Arctic Monkeys.<sup>xlix</sup>

To both of these journalists, Brown is emblematic of a stereotyped and redundant national identity, one that is unattractive to ‘middle England’, one that is in binary opposition to the postmodern Britishness epitomised by his long-term rival, Tony Blair, and one that he feared (at that point) may deny him the chance to fulfil his long-time ambition of becoming the Prime Minister of the UK.

Brown’s insistence on talking about Team GB and Britishness therefore risked flak from both sides, Scotland and England. As it turned out, by the time Brown faced a public vote on his premiership, at the general election of 2010, the subject of national identity was completely overwhelmed by the problems caused by the global financial crisis (and, along with it, Brown’s claims of Labour’s ‘prudence’).

### **The Eclipse of British Culture**

In May 1945, when the second German war ended, British self-esteem was higher than it had been in living memory ... It occurred to hardly anyone, whether in 1935 or 1945, to doubt the value of being British (for which ‘English’ was then a synonym the Scots and Welsh tamely put up with).  
Hugo Young<sup>l</sup>

[My therapist] thinks I’m suffering from lack of self-esteem. She’s probably right, though I read in the paper that there’s a lot of it about. There’s something like an epidemic of lack of self-esteem in Britain at the moment.  
David Lodge<sup>li</sup>

The epigraphs to this section reflect the widespread view that Britishness has been in decline since the Second World War. As Paul Ward notes, recent decades have seen a plethora of politicians, journalists, and intellectuals predicting the imminent collapse of the

UK. This has led, symbiotically, to a deep and sustained interest in the subject of British history and identity, alongside ‘a resurgence of Scottish and Welsh historiography, which equally represents a strengthening of a sense of distinctiveness within those nations’.<sup>lii</sup> At the heart of this discourse is the view that Britishness is considered to have reached its peak in the first half of the twentieth century, and that it is a fixed concept, rooted nostalgically in the past. As such, Ward argues that ‘a new “grand narrative” has been imposed, whereby the disuniting of the kingdom is seen as inevitable’.<sup>liii</sup>

Dominic Sandbrook writes about the ubiquitous sense of British triumphalism and exceptionalism that followed the defeat of the Nazis in 1945, deriving from the perceived superiority about being a country that stood up to Hitler while other European countries surrendered. The fact that Britain was never invaded, he argues, meant that national myths were never challenged, and the British ‘never felt that they needed to question their own innate superiority and virtue; and for some historians, there existed a “cenotaph culture”, simplistic, traditional and self-satisfied’.<sup>liv</sup> This mythology hid the fact that the war had been ‘a catastrophe for the power of the Empire’ and that the economic base of the UK lay in ruins. The Suez Crisis, which Sandbrook cites as being a key moment at which Britain’s decline was laid bare, did not mark the end of this nostalgia.

Intellectuals of the conservative Right – Roger Scruton, Simon Heffer, Ferdinand Mount, Peter Hitchens, and Melanie Philips – are fond of arguing that Britain’s ‘greatness’ has been banished to history; its coherent culture lost to the past. Due not only to the loss of imperial prestige, Britain’s decline has occurred because of Scottish and Welsh devolution, its succumbing to the European project, and the policies of multiculturalism (not to mention what they perceive to be the widespread betrayal of conservative social mores).<sup>lv</sup>

Paul Gilroy critiques these positions, and Britain’s ‘cenotaph culture’, arguing that in the post-war era the narrative of Britishness has been dominated by ‘an obsessive repetition

of key themes – invasion, war, contamination, [and] loss of identity’, which has resulted in ‘an anxious, melancholic mood [becoming] part of the cultural infrastructure of the place’. While arguing that ‘[t]echnology, deindustrialisation, consumerism, loneliness, and the fracturing of family forms have changed the character and content of those ethnic and national cultures as much or even more than immigration ever did’, Gilroy asserts that the country’s ‘inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the Empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige’ has resulted in a retrenchment of a Britishness overwhelmingly defined by notions of racial purity and ethnic homogeneity.<sup>lvi</sup> The trajectory of this narrative forms a straight line through Enoch Powell’s elaborations on the subject in the late 1960s to combustible articles in the right-wing press during ‘the War on Terror’.

Leftists and liberals have also contributed to the zeitgeist of the early 2000s that sees contemporary Britain and Britishness as decayed. Major reference points in this current include: Raphael Samuel’s *Patriotism*,<sup>lvii</sup> Linda Colley’s *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707 – 1837*,<sup>lviii</sup> Norman Davies’s *The Isles*,<sup>lix</sup> Tom Nairn’s *The Break-Up of Britain and After Britain*,<sup>lx</sup> Andrew Marr’s *Ruling Britannia* and *The Day Britain Died*,<sup>lxi</sup> Richard Weight’s *Patriots*,<sup>lxii</sup> Michael Gardiner’s *The Cultural Roots of British Devolution*,<sup>lxiii</sup> and Neal Ascherson’s *Stone Voices*.<sup>lxiv</sup> Taken together, these writers share the view that by the beginning of the twentieth-first century, Britain was little more than a collection of institutions, with no shared foundational culture.

Ward’s position, influenced by the work of Homi Bhabha, is that – despite fundamental changes to the economic and political base of the UK, and the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms since the beginning of the twentieth century – Britishness has always been a constantly mutating phenomenon, which is, contrary to popular opinion, in a position of strength in the contemporary era: he argues that, in recent years, Britishness as an identity

has actually become more flexible, inclusive and plural, focused on civic identity rather than a cultural one based on whiteness. As such, he rejects that Britishness is a stable identity, fixed in the past. It is thus a position that chimes with Brown.

Along with social issues such as child poverty, Britishness became one of Brown's favourite subjects for public discussion from the mid-2000s onwards, in an attempt to project himself to the public as being more than simply an economics expert, as a British rather than a Scottish politician, and as part of his gravitation to the leadership of his party and the office of Prime Minister. Brown's new mission as of the mid-2000s, having apparently healed Britain's schizophrenic economy, was to do the same for a British sense of identity and self-worth. He harboured clear ambitions to generate a new confidence in Britain and Britishness by cultivating a 'positive' version of identity that would seek to prove that British culture was vibrant and relevant in the new century. In numerous speeches during this period Brown talked about 'creating a shared national purpose' and 'being clear about what we value about being British'.<sup>lxv</sup> 'Looking back through '2000 years of successive waves of invasion, immigration, assimilation and trading partnerships', he argued that this history had 'created a uniquely rich and diverse culture' from which 'certain forces emerge again and again which make up a characteristic British set of values and qualities which, taken together, mean that there is indeed a strong and vibrant Britishness that underpins Britain'. This history, he continued, has 'made us remarkably outward looking and open' and has encouraged a culture that is 'creative and inventive'. 'Britain's roots are on the most solid foundation of all – a passion for liberty anchored in a sense of duty and an intrinsic commitment to tolerance and fair play'.<sup>lxvi</sup>

The main attraction of this formulation of collective identity is that it rests on values that are inclusive: that is to say it is an articulation of a Britishness that does not privilege a single race or ethnicity, or focus on birthright or homeland. These were sentiments echoed by

the economist Will Hutton in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on London in June 2005 (which occurred on the day after the announcement that London would be host city in 2012). Hutton argued that the strength of Britain and Britishness lay in the fact that it was ‘a political jurisdiction that has common practical mores while allowing our emotional identity to be rooted in one of the tribes from which the country has been constituted over time – English, Welsh, Scottish, Jews – and for immigrants, India, Nigeria or Barbados’. ‘The idea’, he continued, ‘encompasses multiple traditions, stories, tribes and eccentricities [and] belonging means little more than speaking the language, recognising the complexities and achievements while acknowledging the minimal rules that flow from the political arrangements’.<sup>lxvii</sup>

The Britishness elaborated by Ward, Brown and Hutton, then, is not only a riposte to the conservative versions of history cited above, but to the ubiquitous pessimistic mood about the subject elaborated by contemporary intellectuals and theorists who argue, from different positions, that Britain and Britishness have grown increasingly moribund throughout the post-war era. While these ‘positive’ elaborations of Britishness are theoretically able to stand alongside the separate national identities (in the sense that one can be, for example, at once British and Welsh), they have since the 1960s been far less successful in gaining traction than have those of, especially, Scottishness and Welshness. This has also been the case in sport, especially football, where these identities have both reflected and helped construct a new sense of national difference and confidence.

### **Team GB, or No Team GB?**

The national team matters more than anything else in football ... Club football is, without doubt, the heart of football, and the heart of football is opposition. But it is not the soul. The soul of football lies in unity. And nothing in football, nothing in life, unites people such as international football.  
Simon Barnes<sup>lxviii</sup>

During the last few decades, much work within the flourishing disciplines of Sport History and wider Sport Studies has focused on the relationships between sport and national identity within the context of Britain and beyond.<sup>lxi</sup> This literature has emphasised that discourses of national identity within the realm of sport generally work towards creating homogenous identities that are highly selective, covering up differences that exist within nations in terms of, for example, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. As Martin Polley notes, in the act of ‘imagining’ that a national team embodies a nation, certain traits are privileged as national characteristics, and media coverage revels in reinforcing national stereotypes.<sup>lxx</sup> In terms of football, this process is witnessed not only in the banal use of national stereotypes in everyday media discourse, but also more explicitly in the popular national football histories that have become ubiquitous since the early 1990s, which identify and elaborate separate national traditions and styles of play.<sup>lxxi</sup> This is a process that has long existed, but one that has arguably become more prominent in recent years. As the sport has become increasingly commercialised, national histories and images have been increasingly packaged and sold as commodities.<sup>lxxii</sup>

In the context of football in Britain, the trajectory towards separate nationalisms both reflects and has contributed to the historical change in attitudes towards the concept of a Team GB. As the journalist Steve Menary illustrates in *GB United?*, football teams representing Britain competed at, or attempted to qualify for, Olympiads from 1908 to 1972 without protest. Furthermore, in 1947 and 1955, players from the separate nations united to play benefit matches against ‘Rest of the World’ teams under the banner of Great Britain.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Crucially, these teams comprised amateurs and were bound up in the Victorian values of ‘play’ and Muscular Christianity: something which in the neoliberal present seems utterly quaint, and serves to emphasise again how Britishness is often tied, nostalgically, to a past long gone.

Attempting to sell Team GB in the contemporary era along the lines of a ‘positive’, civic British identity is therefore difficult as the overwhelming trend in the post-War era in sport in general, and in football in particular, has been a hardening of separate national identities within Britain, and an increase in antagonisms between them. As Richard Holt has noted, the separate nations of the UK have long histories of antagonism in the context of football. At the turn of the twentieth century,

“Scottishness” and “Welshness” were constantly fed by a sense of antagonism towards the English as the politically and economically dominant force. Sport acted as a vitally important channel for this sense of collective resentment, which was the nearest either people came to a popular national consciousness.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

Holt and Mason suggest that since the end of the Empire, the intensity of support for the English national team has increased exponentially as winning on the football field became a more important way of expressing national excellence;<sup>lxxv</sup> Weight notes how anti-English feeling in sport has increased among Scots and Welsh, illustrated in the reactions to England’s World Cup victory in 1966;<sup>lxxvi</sup> much academic work has focused on the ways in which the Scots have defined themselves against the English as a means of expressing national difference, with the World Cup in 1978 and the rise of the ‘Tartan Army’ crucial touchstones;<sup>lxxvii</sup> and Martin Johnes has noted ‘the growth of anti-Englishness in Welsh sport [dating] from the 1960s, when wider Welsh nationalism took on [a] more overt, confident and even confrontational character’.<sup>lxxviii</sup> The flipside of Barnes’ comments regarding the unity of international football is its potential to divide, especially within a multi-national state such as the UK.

A recent example of antagonism occurred in February 2010 when it was widely reported that Grampian Police officers investigating an incitement to racial hatred had visited a shop in Aberdeen called 'Slanj'. The basis of this investigation was the fact that Slanj had been selling a T-shirt emblazoned with the words, 'Anyone But England' (ABE).<sup>lxxix</sup> Although no charges were brought against the business, the story served as the beginning of another round of Team GB discourse that flared until the conclusion of England's participation in the finals of the South Africa World Cup (a competition for which Scotland had again failed to qualify). In June 2010, further anti-English assaults were reported in the north-east of Scotland;<sup>lxxx</sup> HMV announced that they were no longer stocking ABE T-shirts, having started their own line after the shirts had boomed in popularity following the publicity of the Slanj affair;<sup>lxxxi</sup> and a shopping centre in Edinburgh was criticised for running a holiday competition with the title, 'Anywhere But England please!'<sup>lxxxii</sup>

The 'positive', civic versions of Britishness outlined above, then, go against the grain of both the Britishness articulated in the tradition of 'cenotaph culture', and the historical trajectory of sport and national identity, which emphasises the homogeneity of the individual nations. Following the departure of Brown, moreover, positive versions of civic Britishness have largely disappeared from public discourse: the coalition government's elaborations of collective identity have rung hollow at best, and have been entirely negative at worst. David Cameron's 'Big Society' is hardly inspiring stuff. In terms of Team GB, it would appear that from the point of view of the proponents, the arguments are over. It seems that the decision to field a multinational Team GB has already been taken, no matter the negative reactions it may provoke, evidenced by the decision of the BOA to have the Welsh players Gareth Bale and Aaron Ramsey posing in Team GB shirts to promote the kit launch in late 2011 despite protests from the FAW.



The announcement in early 2011 that the SNP will hold a referendum on independence in 2014 has ensured that arguments about the Union and the condition of Britishness will occupy a prominent position in public discourse in the time leading up to London 2012 and beyond. At the time of writing, it has yet to be confirmed officially that a multi-national Team GB will compete at London 2012. But even if it does come to fruition, it will surely not fulfil the romantic unity that Brown, Coe, and others seem to imagine. What is certain is that a multi-national Team GB will not serve as a panacea for the wider issues explored here.

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